

# Officials fête Oberstar for funding feat

By Neal St. Anthony  
Star Tribune Staff Writer

You would think U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar, a Democrat from Chisholm, was the congressman from St. Paul on Saturday as he stood among 150 well-wishers on the steps of the 82-year-old Union Depot near St. Paul's loop riverfront.

Business and political luminaries — as well as Betty McCollum, as the real member of Congress from the St. Paul area — had hastily arranged a reception for the senior member of the House Transportation Committee to celebrate his recent feat in Washington, D.C. Early Friday, Oberstar pushed through a \$50 million federal down payment on what boosters say will be a renaissance for the depot as a major rail and ground transportation hub that will be part of a \$300 million public-private transportation network.

"What has an Iron Ranger got to do with St. Paul?" Oberstar said with a wink at McCollum, who represents the city, and other Ramsey County and St. Paul officials. "We are adding a million new rail passengers a day, and America is catching on. And this [depot] is going to be a citadel of transportation."

Oberstar knew that creating a St. Paul hub for light rail to Minneapolis, more express buses to Minneapolis and commuter rail and buses to distant suburbs, was the top transportation priority for McCollum, the Ramsey County Board and St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly.

But he stunned them with the news of up-front funding and designation of St. Paul as one of eight regional transit hubs, his handiwork in the \$268.5 billion, five-year federal transportation bill passed by the House and Senate. President Bush is expected to sign

the bill into law.

Oberstar has been wooed since 2001 by McCollum and then-Mayor Norm Coleman, who also threw his weight into the project as a U.S. senator.

David Block, a retired St. Paul Companies executive who heads a business-government task force that selected the depot as the best site for a loop transportation hub, said the federal funding now sets in motion what had been just a vision.

"It was a no-brainer," Block said. "All the research said the depot was the right site."

The U.S. Postal Service has indicated that it will vacate the Mississippi River-level concourse of the depot and is negotiating to sell an adjacent 12 acres of land to Ramsey County, which will function as the regional rail authority. The Postal Service plans to consolidate operations at more modern facilities in Eagan by 2008 or 2009.

Weiming Lu, head of the Lowertown Redevelopment Corp., and other private developers said the federal commitment to the transportation hub and related rail lines will inspire further development in the old warehouse section of downtown St. Paul.

Rail advocates say such transportation hubs, which connect light rail, commuter rail and bus service over busy routes, will in the long run be less costly and more energy-efficient than trying to widen congested roads or add new freeways.

The Union Depot was constructed in 1923 by the Great Northern Railroad for about \$500,000.

Oberstar, a University of St. Thomas graduate, can remember catching trains at the old Union Depot more than 40 years ago.

Neal St. Anthony can be reached at 612-673-7144 or [nstanthony@startribune.com](mailto:nstanthony@startribune.com).



U.S. Rep.  
James  
Oberstar

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**St. Paul's Union Depot will receive \$50 million in federal money to help remake it into a 21st century transportation hub.**